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**Paul Foster**

### **Q as a Reflection of the Concerns of Sub-Elite Galilean Scribes**

1. These two careful, detailed and insightful monographs, one written by Rollens in 2014<sup>1</sup> and other by Bazzana in 2015,<sup>2</sup> both attempt to reconstruct a more plausible account of the milieu or social background of the document that they both call the Sayings Gospel Q. While both authors see the significance of locating Q in a rural setting, nonetheless they both reject the notion that the authors or framers of Q should be situated in the lowest socio-economic eschalons of first-century eastern Mediterranean society.

2. Rollens foregrounds the potential misunderstanding that arose from locating much of the early Jesus movement in the context of the lowest socio-economic levels, with Jesus traditions seen as being circulated among illiterate peasants fully reliant on the oral transmission of foundational stories and myths. Instead, while acknowledging that those who framed Q were social non-elites, rather than describing them as part of the lowest level in the societal pyramid, Rollens speaks of them as “middling figures.” Thus she states, “the authors of Q could be conceived along the lines of other middling figures who became visible within or even lead other peasant movements, resistance movements, or groups that more generally advocate reform and challenge the socio-political elite in society” (p. 4). Here, she and Bazzana are close in their respective conceptions of the status and intentions of the authors of Q. Bazzana, whose work we shall return to, probes the wider political theology articulated in Q by the scribal sub-elites responsible for its composition. Both view Q as non-elite literature, but at the same time regard it as not originating among the lowest levels of peasant society. Moreover, both regard Q as potentially having some political agenda. Here, if understood correctly, this is a small “p” type of politics that seeks the reformulation of society to align it with the socio-religious views held by the authors of Q and the adherents to the early Jesus movement.

Rollens’ work moves forward in a number of clearly structured and readily identifiable stages. First, she presents and then seeks to problematize the view that early Christianity (and by implication the Q document) developed among the lowest strata of society. In part, as Rollens realizes such models of the development of the early Jesus movement are largely dependent on Marxist readings of history—which seek bottom-up accounts to be placed in tension with elitist historical macro-narratives. In regard to the way such perspectives have been taken up as accounts of the Jesus movement, Rollens interacts with the work of G.R. Horsley who employs the notion of peasantry to invoke the notion of a hidden and subversive transcript expressed by non-elites in documents such as Q to challenge and contradict the public transcripts as expressed in the state religion of Jerusalem. While Rollens see much of value in the peasant characterization of the early Jesus movement, she correctly critiques its unidimensional representation of the early Jesus movement. Even among those who utilize this category with profit, there is a tendency to view peasant-experience as uniform and without graduations of social and cultural status. While Rollens recognizes that non-elite concerns such as economic and social powerlessness come to the fore in Q, her major observation is that Q is a text of relative sophistication, and consequently “peasants simply would not have had the learning or resources to produce a text such as this” (p. 43).

In Chapter three, “The Sociology of the Middle in Antiquity,” Rollens mounts her positive case. Drawing on anthropological and sociological studies she supplies a thick-description of a social stratum that is typically neglected in the study of late antiquity. Rollens choice of the terminology,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Rollens, *Framing Social Criticism in the Jesus Movement* (WUNT 2.374; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni B. Bazzana, *Kingdom of Bureaucracy: The Political Theology of Village Scribes in the Sayings Gospel Q* (BETL 274; Leuven: Peeters, 2015).

“middling figures” (indebted to Robert Kaster), is carefully chosen. She acknowledges, “although there was no clearly articulated middle-class consciousness in antiquity, it does not follow that middling figures simply did not exist at all” (p. 45). Such figures are seen as responsible for the production of Q. These figures are more fully understood as mediating intellectuals, who frequently play a role in religious movements that challenge the power structures and claims of the elite classes. They are seen as structurally isolated in that they are liminal both in relation to the dominant elite power-brokers, but also removed from the larger peasant classes because of the possession of intellectual or literary skills. This double marginalization, combined with intellectual capacity, is part of the matrix in which such structurally liminal figures can articulate sophisticated critiques of social structures. According to Rollens “marginal figures are often found articulating class concerns, even consciousness, on behalf of those who cannot or do not” (p. 65). Therefore, such middling intellectual figures frequently direct the developments of new social movements. Rollens links these observations to the study of Q via Arnal’s observation that the scribes responsible for framing Q experienced a sense of being obsolete in first century Galilee. Consequently, it is suggested that these middling intellectual figures “fashioned a text which expressed the peasants’ concern through the mouth of Jesus” (p. 79).

Although Rollens notes that such a social challenge is expressed “through the mouth of Jesus,” given the role of creative scribal figures it is unclear why on her account of the Q document there is any need to attribute these sayings to Jesus. This raises the question of the relation of the Q traditions to the message of the historical Jesus. Admittedly, Q as a document written in Greek and perhaps arranged by various compilers, does not reflect the connected pristine *ipsissima verba* Jesu. However, one might ask whether Q is a faithful rendition of the message of Jesus? If so, are these assumed scribal figures those responsible for the intellectual creativity in challenging societal structures, or should that role be more accurately attributed to the movement’s founding figure? If not, then why is Jesus remembered at all in Q? Apparently he is not remembered for his sacrificial death in Q, but instead for his provocative teaching. If, however, that teaching does not originate with Jesus, but rather with middling intellectual creative why are they not remembered rather than Jesus? Thus the difficulty with Rollens’ account of Q is to understand the need of reference to Jesus—unless he is indeed in some sense the source of the message of socio-religious reform found in the Sayings Gospel. If Q does correctly attribute that role to Jesus, then are not the scribes mainly responsible for the translation, arrangement and transmission of the Q material? This would imply they are not so much creative intellectual figures challenging the social norms of their day, but rather better described as literate individuals who transmitted the traditions of Jesus’ teaching. And if so, then it is that teaching of Jesus that is the creative impetus and origin of the social challenge, rather than viewing it as stemming from a set of faceless and nameless scribes who supposedly were struggling to cope with their own sense of obsolescence in first century Galilee.

In Chapter four, Rollens provides an excellent overview of some key issues in Q studies. The arguments for Q being a written document and composed in Greek are perhaps some of the clearest and most succinct statements of these positions. The dating of Q is a more complex issue with few decisive pieces of evidence. Rollens argues that the knowledge of Jesus and his death suggests Q is to be dated after 35 C.E., but the Jewish War does not appear to shape the contents of Q, hence it must be written before those events. In the end she comes to the position that “the composition of Q stands somewhere in the early in the 60s C.E.” (p. 99). In addition to date, Rollens notes that “[e]stablishing a geographical provenance for Q is equally significant for discerning the authors’ social experience and how this experience could contribute to the presentation of Q” (p. 100). Rollens bases her decision to locate the composition of Q in Lower Galilee on the occurrence of various place names and the observation that “these locations appear mostly in Q<sup>2</sup>, not in the formative layer of the document.” She continues by stating

[t]he significance of this need not be overstated; at the very least, it simply indicates that at the time of Q1 's composition, it was not important—for whatever reason—for the authors to make any spatial or geographical claims or to cast judgments against any particular settlements (p. 103).

Here then the determination of the geographical location of the composition of Q appears to be tied to a certain theory of the composition of the document. One might wish to ask whether the reconstruction of the purpose of Q, linked to social criticism framed by marginalized middling intellectual scribes to address the sense of displacement and liminality in the Galilean context, would still hold if one did not subscribe to the theory of composition that is articulated, or did not accept the dating of the document to the early 60s. What if a sapiential layer were not separate from, or did not pre-date, the judgment sayings issued against certain Galilean communities? What if the woes against Chorazin and Bethsaida originated with the historical Jesus, and were replicated because they were among the traditions communicated to the framers of Q? If Rollens is correct that reference to locations such as Capernaum belong to the Q<sup>2</sup> layer and hence are an indicator of location of composition, does it then follow that the uniquely Matthean story of the didrachma in the mouth of the fish that counsels compliance with paying the tax levied, which occurs in the Gospel after Jesus and his disciples “had come to Capernaum,” also implies that Matthew’s Gospel was composed in Capernaum or its near environs? If not, then why do place names imply place of composition for Q, but not for other NT documents even when found in uniquely redactional material?

In her fifth Chapter Rollens interacts with recent hypotheses concerning the social location of the Q group within the location of wider Galilean society. Theissen’s notion of wandering charismatics is swiftly rejected, not only because of its imprecision in applying Weberian theory, but also because the limited geographical area of lower Galilee (the putative locale of the Q people) was simply too small to allow any meaningful sense of itinerancy. Instead more attention is devoted to the proposal that the Q people were a group of prophetic performers advocating a programme to renew local village communities based on ancient Israelite ethics, or that the Q people were low-level scribes whose recent displacement and rejection in Galilean villages is reflected in much of Q’s rhetoric (p. 111). It is acknowledged that Q participates in Israel’s prophetic discourse. However, it is argued that Q itself does not exhibit the most fundamental feature of a prophetic discourse—the presentation of the direct voice of God. Furthermore, and this is a particularly strong and persuasive point, made by Rollens and others, in Q “there is simply no evidence of the oral performance that Horsley imagines” as the cornerstone of his prophetic performers hypothesis. Therefore, partially by default due to the weakness of alternative hypotheses, and partly drawing upon the arguments of Bill Arnal and others, Rollens sees the most plausible description of the Q people as middle-level scribes, who by definition were literate. From this perspective the Q document is not only concerned with the meaning of its teachings, but with more meta-level questions concerning the authority basis and transmission process for those teachings.

In the final main Chapter of the study, Sarah Rollens turns to the larger issue of unpacking the nature of “the ideological project in Q.” This in many ways is the most stimulating Chapter in what is throughout a fascinating monograph. First, passages are examined that may reflect peasant concerns. While it is acknowledged that there are images that reflect agrarian society where exploitation is not uncommon, it is argued that such images are not employed primarily to represent peasant interests. While the beatitude for the poor (Q 6:20b) is seen as having an ostensible focus on actual economic disadvantage, it is suggested that the major rhetorical concern is with the ostracism of disciples. Therefore, the beatitude for the poor has been reformulated. According to Rollens, “[c]oncerns for socio-economic disadvantage are thus present in the language of Q, but they function argumentatively not indicatively/ demonstratively. In short, peasant interests are thus

mediated for a larger project: Q's social commentary" (p. 146). Whether such a subtle distinction holds is moot, especially when coupled with concerns about provision of food and other regular worries about sustenance and clothing (Q 12:22b–31). One further point that is pertinent to Rollens rejection of peasant concerns being fundamental to Q's ideology is the observation that these images of peasant concerns "stem almost entirely from Q1" (p. 158). Consequently, it is suggested that the framers of Q mediated and modified these interests through the addition of the Q<sup>2</sup> layer, and thereby transformed the ideological outlook of the larger document.

Therefore, according to Rollens, Q is a sophisticated literary composition that articulates an ambitious project of social reform. Such a complex task could not have been undertaken by the illiterate peasant classes, but is more accurately understood to be the product of non-elite middle level scribes with a desire to bring about socio-religious reform in the context of Lower Galilee.

3. Giovanni Bazzana's substantial monograph overlaps with the work of Rollens, but is not identical in its perspectives, nor in the structure of its argument. Whereas Rollens presents arguments for the existence, language and geographical location of Q, Bazzana simply presents his understanding of those issues as starting points. Q indeed existed, it was written in Greek, and the region of origin was "rural Galilee, most likely among those villages and towns in which Jesus of Nazareth had been active as a preacher and wonder worker" (p. 3). One key difference between Bazzana and Rollens is that he does not adopt Kloppenborg's theory of the stratification of the Sayings Gospel. Bazzana posits that "in all likelihood Q circulated as a 'private' document, copied in informal and relatively unskilled ways by the sub-elite intellectuals who had an interest in it" (p. 4). This rejection of Kloppenborg's stratification hypothesis may not be as straightforward for Bazzana's own overall theory as he imagines. This is because Kloppenborg's account of the redaction history of the Sayings Gospel is actually the premise on which the theory of authorship by "Galilean village scribes" is built. Kloppenborg makes that attribution of provenance on the basis of his estimate of the literary level of Q1, namely, modest literary skills on display, in his view. Therefore, once one abandons the redaction history, one has abandoned the grounds for attribution to the Galilean village scribes, or at least, one is now obligated to find new grounds for it. Apart from this key difference, Rollens and Bazzana share a very similar set of basic assumptions, and perhaps unsurprisingly this results in presentations, which although not identical are largely compatible. Bazzana, also in concert with Rollens, rejects the ideas of Theissen that Q represents the message of itinerant preachers that would speak, "for the poor against imperialism, patriarchalism, and ultimately any inequality fostered by socio-economic hegemony" (p. 6).

To reconstruct his understanding of the social setting of the Sayings Gospel, Bazzana also rejects the typical approach he attributes to New Testament scholars (which he states is due to their bias arising from training as theologians) whereby they "draw socio-historical inferences from a straightforward reading of biblical texts" (p. 8). Instead Bazzana prioritizes an approach that first identifies a suitable social group that might be responsible for the composition of the Sayings Gospel. Then, after that social group has been determined, Bazzana propose to evaluate the Q document in order to determine "whether Q contains literary and ideological features consistent with the hypothetical authorship" (p. 9). As a thought-experiment, or as an exploratory approach this is an interesting idea. However, it does appear to raise a number of significant methodological questions of a fundamental nature. For instance, if one were to study 1 Corinthians, then maybe much of value could be learnt by considering the social make-up of the city around the 50s of the common era. One could potentially detect wider religious issues dominating discourse in the city, or uncover a variety of economic or social pressures that may have found an outlet for those who aligned with a new religious movement. Those socio-cultural conditions could then be read against the contents of the letter. But what if they were not surfaced in the contents of the letter? Would

that mean they were non-issues for the recipients or the author, or simply that they were not the central concerns being addressed in the letter? The hermeneutical danger inherent in this type of approach is that of allowing background issues to shape one's reading of the contents. Perhaps a more normative approach would be to determine the issues addressed within the literary contours of the letter, and then to see if the wider context of first century Corinth illuminated those issues, or whether they were apparently unique to the recipients of the letter.

Yet the problem is more vexed in the case of Q. There are no named addressees. Admittedly, as Rollens has pointed out, there are some Galilean place names, but they are in some ways necessary to the presentation of the sayings of the figure of Jesus from Nazareth against certain cities in his locale. Whether those place names reflect the location of composition of the Sayings Gospel is more difficult to determine. In the end, Bazzana's approach appears to privilege the most uncertain part of his hypothesis—the location and date of the Q document—over the more certain aspect—the reconstruction of the contents of the text. By contrast with the method adopted by Bazzana, starting with the text first would appear a more natural approach. This is not due to any theological bias as Bazzana suggests, but rather due to basic scientific principles of beginning with the secure data and building outwards from the strongest evidential basis to less secure aspects of the hypothesis.

Bazzana also engages in comparative study between "Q, a text of Galilean origin, and the Egyptian materials produced by village administrators" (p. 9). It is difficult to see what makes this comparison apposite, apart from the assumption that both Q and the documents from Egypt were written by village scribes. The trouble with this approach is that it builds upon precisely what Bazzana is trying to prove. So one wonders whether this may be a case of assuming the conclusion that one is trying to establish and then reading that core assumption into Q to establish self-confirmation of the hypothesis under examination.

Bazzana's study is arranged in six Chapters that basically constitute two parts of this monograph. The first three Chapters examine the profile of village scribes in the Greco-Roman world. In turn these Chapters examine the social profile of such scribal figures, next it probes the linguistic expressions characteristic of the scribal figures behind the Sayings Gospel, and thirdly it seeks to describe the specific socio-cultural profile of such administrative bureaucrats in first century rural Galilee. The first Chapter is a fascinating and extremely deep piece of scholarship. By employing Giddens's model of "distanciation," Bazzana comes to the conclusion that village scribal administrators were not part of the ruling elite, but held a "middling social position." The agreement with Rollens concerning the social position of those responsible for framing Q is striking. This no doubt in part reflects similar starting points and an indebtedness that is fully acknowledged by both Bazzana and Rollens to the work of Bill Arnal. The second Chapter is one of the strongest for mounting Bazzana's case. Here he presents three case studies, where linguistic elements in Q are seen as reflecting the terminological habits of village scribes. In turn these involve Q 10.2, where the term ἐκβάλλω "cast out" is in some ways an odd choice when something like "send out" may have been more natural. However, among the documentary papyri Bazzana finds the term ἐκβάλλω in several documentary papyri to indicate assignment of compulsory tasks. The second example involving the term οἰκετεία is also fascinating in its resonances with wider use in documentary papyri. However, here Bazzana is faced with the additional problem that this hapax legomenon is found only in the Matthean version of the saying (Matt 24:45) and not in the Lukan parallel (Lk 12:42). While οἰκετεία may reflect the original Q terminology one cannot be as certain of its occurrence in Q as was the case with ἐκβάλλω. At the very least, this lessens the strength of this example for establishing Q's shared use of rural scribal terminology since one cannot be certain that this is indeed a term found in Q. In Chapter three Bazzana again helpfully maps out the social profile of rural scribes operating in a Galilean context and writing documents in Greek. He contends that

neither knowledge of Greek, nor awareness of Greek canonical authors, negates the Jewish identity of the administrators who stood behind Q (p. 163).

The second part of the book, Chapters four to six, then interacts with some of the key socio-political and religious ideas in Q in order to illustrate how such concerns and ideas originated among middle level village administrators. In Chapter four the focus falls on the key political concept of βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ. Commencing with a detailed analysis of the term βασιλεία in the Lord's Prayer, Bazzana argues that the term is connected with "features of royal ideology apparent in Greco-Roman bureaucratic documentation, but with a transposition from a human to a divine level" (p. 211). However, given that Bazzana argues strongly for the Jewish identity of those scribes responsible for Q, it would be interesting to hear more about how this Greco-Roman notion of βασιλεία might align with Jewish religious ideas about the kingship and reign of God. In that regard, one might push a little harder and ask whether the primary referent is to be found in Greco-Roman documentary papyri or in the religious texts of Judaism? The next two Chapters skilfully unpack the shape and potential impact of this political idea of βασιλεία among the scribes behind Q. Yet one is left wondering whether the Hellenistic understanding of "kingdom" provides a better background to understanding Q's perspective on βασιλεία, than the references in the Jewish scriptures. In Daniel 7:13–14 there is a collocation between references to the coming Son of Man and the kingdom that is presented to him. Given that both the coming Son of Man and the kingdom are significant themes in Q, often discussed in closely related contexts, it may appear more plausible to see passages such as Daniel 7:13–14 forming the ideological background for Q, rather than the noticeably vague Hellenistic political ideas of βασιλεία.

For Bazzana, the outcome of his work is that it is now possible to associate the production and perspectives of Q with a well defined group. Second, Bazzana claims that his approach has confirmed the importance of the documentary papyri. Third, it is suggested that Q has preserved important information about the socio-cultural profile of rural sub-elites in the eastern Mediterranean. There is no doubt that Bazzana's study is rich, full of important insights, and presents important parallels from the documentary papyri. However, a sense of unease lies with the methodology. Bazzana claims that his "methodological procedure minimizes the danger of circularity and thus provides a more solid basis from which further research can be conducted" (p. 315). Despite this claim, at least to this reader, the sense is that precisely the opposite is true. By starting with a reconstructed social background for the Sayings Gospel, rather than with the contents of the text, one is left with the constant impression that when it comes to reading Q itself, the interpretation of the text is being ruthlessly shoe-horned into the sociological model that has been constructed in relation to those who are seen as having framed Q. Yet that model is itself not unproblematic. While the appeal to the documentary papyri is fascinating and benefits from bringing new texts to the discussion, it is also necessary to ask about the heuristic value of ancient Egyptian documents originating in a different context and at times from a different period for illuminating the background of Q. Is there not a danger in this approach of reading the ancient Mediterranean social situation in a monochrome manner, without being attuned to the social variance across different geographical locations and perhaps more significantly across different structures of religious thought?

Therefore, for Rollens and Bazzana, Q is a sophisticated literary composition that articulates an ambitious project of social or political reform. Such a complex task could not have been undertaken by the illiterate peasant classes, but is more accurately understood to be the product of non-elite middle level scribes with a desire to bring about socio-religious reform in the context of Lower Galilee. It may be asked what can readers take away from these studies if they do not accept Bazzana's and Rollens' views about the geographical origin of Q, or the idea that those who framed Q were middle level scribal figures, or in Rollens' case the theory of the stratification of Q? Is it fair

to say these are “all or nothing books”? Must one accept the totality of the arguments to reap the benefits promised if their central hypotheses are correct. Perhaps it is possible to agree with the rejection of characterizing the early Jesus movement as originating among the lowest levels of peasant society without divorcing the concern for social reform from the historical Jesus. Moreover, given the literary character of the movement it is possible to see scribal factors at work in some way behind the Q document. However, creating such a distance between the founding figure of the movement and some of its core intellectual ideas does appear to be the most problematic aspect of this stimulating discussion. Notwithstanding that critique, these are extremely rich, engaging, and well structured books that will repay careful study for generations of Q scholars and those interested in the origins of the Jesus movement more widely.

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